

Demosthenes, inside and out

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Demosthenes is often thought of as a great leader of Athens, inspiring his fellow citizens at times of crisis with his oratory. But here Guy Westwood considers the periods either side of the peak in his career, when in different ways he found himself something of an outsider.

When Demosthenes is mentioned, it is usually as a great orator or as a great democratic politician – the man who, according to the standard view, championed the liberty of Athens in the fourth century B.C. against the threat presented by Philip of Macedon, rallying the Athenians against Philip with the power of his oratory. But if we examine the speeches and career of Demosthenes either side of this watershed period, we see a politician frustrated by and then enmeshed in a political consensus that limited his opportunities for distinctive individual leadership.

Demosthenes' famous speeches against the threat of Philip of Macedon – the so-called *Olynthiacs* and *Philippics* – were delivered over a decade from 351 B.C. as the growing power of Macedon to the north threatened to overcome Athens. Ultimately, they failed; Philip defeated Athens at the battle of Chaeronea in 338 B.C., and assumed a dominant role in Greece. Demosthenes, who in the three or so years up to Chaeronea had become the most important man in Athens, directing affairs and finally implementing policies which had been rejected by the public and by his fellow politicians for years, never quite recovered his former prestige and power.

Philip treated the fallen Athens moderately, offering the city a chance to spend time looking inward and concentrating on civic reform and cultural regrowth – an age of relative consensus after the crisis of failed resistance to Macedon. Demosthenes was not punished for his anti-Macedonian views and actions, but the meagre evidence for his career in those years suggests that his moment in the spotlight seemed to have passed: like Athens herself, he was somewhat eclipsed by Philip's triumph.

Although Demosthenes might have thought himself lucky to have avoided a worse fate, he was still only in his early fifties (when some senior politicians like his rival Phocion were remaining active

and influential into their eighties and nineties), and must have found his new circumstances constraining. In particular, the prosperity and calm that followed Philip's final victory, and which can be seen in luxurious monuments like the choragic victory monument of Lysicrates pictured here, offered relatively little to a man who had thrived best on crisis. The new consensus may have suited many, perhaps most Athenians – but it did not suit Demosthenes.

On the outside, looking in

What is especially interesting about this situation is that Demosthenes had, in a sense, been there before – but on the outside, trying to get in. If we look back to his early speeches of the 350s B.C., when he was trying to establish himself at Athens, we can see his disaffection with the politics of consensus. He seems to see Athens' political class as a cosy, elite club which entrenched failure and which, perhaps not coincidentally, made it hard for newcomers like himself to break in.

Athens ran on public speech, and taking steps to recommend oneself as a useful politician was just as appropriate behaviour in the courts as it was in its natural environment, the Assembly. Court speeches written by Demosthenes in this period for himself and for his associates show powerfully how he used court oratory to establish and advance his own political ideas. His first surviving speeches from the Athenian Assembly and from a political trial come from 354, when he was thirty, and at that point he had already written several speeches for others to deliver in court, building up a reputation in this field right from the age of eighteen.

In 354 Athens was still reeling from the damage done to its resources and morale when some of its major subordinate allies went into revolt (often called the Social War of 357–5 B.C., ending in a humiliating peace after two years. Different politi-

cians had different answers to the question of how Athens could recover; most tried to dissociate themselves from the policies that had led to the war. We cannot know for certain which of these groups Demosthenes may have joined; but the most important thing of all for this ambitious thirty-year-old must have been to show the public that the older generation of politicians as a whole had failed, and explain how he and his associates could stake a claim to do better.

Demosthenes will not have been alone in this; but his is the evidence we have, and it is precisely through speeches like those we possess that his claim to improve late-350s Athens will have been communicated. In each of the four speeches that survive from this period, the same discontent is expressed with the way Athenian politics currently works; affairs are depicted as the preserve of an entrenched elite under whom nothing can change and whose solutions to the post-Social-War Athens do not represent fresh thinking about the issues. The new generation, Demosthenes repeatedly suggests, can alter all that.

Conjuring a phantom consensus

But how could Demosthenes represent his opponents as a sterile consensus when it would be well known by his audiences that different senior politicians had quite different policies? Looking at the strategy of *Against Leptines* – which Demosthenes delivered himself – can give us an idea.

The speech is part of a prosecution of the politician Leptines for passing a law stripping almost all those Athenians currently in receipt of grants of exemption (from most types of tax and other civic obligations) of their awards – honours given to them or their forebears for different types of good service to the city. The measure was probably a sensible (and popular) one in an age of austerity – it made more wealthy citizens liable to fund essential aspects of civic life (state festivals and their competitions, triremes etc.) – so Demosthenes had quite a task on his hands in attacking it. The five men chosen to speak in defence of the law were all eminent members of the political elite.

The line-up did not deter Demosthenes,

though; this was an ideal opportunity for the young man to demonstrate his persuasive appeal as a rising politician. He now had a chance to portray the entire political establishment as in fact out of touch with what Athens actually needed, and in the speech he does it by taking an imaginative long view of how Athens had treated its benefactors.

The city's history, as painted by Demosthenes in a sequence of vivid examples, suggests that it is fundamental to being Athenian to accept a benefaction, honour the benefactor, and never renege on it; preserving the city's reputation for remembering its benefactors is therefore far more important than freeing up a handful of rich men for civic obligations. Demosthenes bases his case on a carefully constructed idea of the virtuous, glorious (and indeed spotless) Athenian past: of how things have always been, and how Leptines' law will rupture a timeless set of values. At a time of economic crisis, all this would sound very attractive – it would make the audience feel optimistic that the good times would come round again if they only followed Demosthenes' advice. It is interesting that Demosthenes reached for the past to justify a policy in the present because, as we are going to see, that became a popular tactic in the years after Macedon took control.

For a young, rising politician to do this in such a setting was a daring strategic move; talking in detail about past events in the Athenian courts was much more naturally the province of older speakers – like Demosthenes' opponents – who had lived through some of the events being described. To carry conviction, Demosthenes' versions would have to be exactly what would engage the audience most. So he goes out of his way to forge that connection. Orators often appeal to a wide historical knowledge they claim the audience possesses – a good tactic, because audiences are usually far happier to be credited by a speaker with knowledge they don't in fact possess than they are to be talked down to. *Against Leptines* contains more flagrant outings of this rhetorical tactic than any other Demosthenic speech. What the orator tries to do is to 'unmask' Leptines and the others as Athenians who do not in fact understand Athens (as he does) – who do not share the 'natural' ability to see what is right for the city that Demosthenes claims implicitly for himself and explicitly for his audience.

So the individual personalities and affiliations of the five speakers ranged against Demosthenes are cleverly blurred; and the tactic keeps recurring in the four big court speeches of the 350s, as Demosthenes and his clients find different ways of expressing their discontent with the status quo. But it is interesting to note that although

Demosthenes continues to refer to Athenian history throughout his career, he never uses it to attack the political establishment again after 346. By the end of that year, after service on the Council, service on two high-profile embassies, and close involvement in the making of a major peace treaty, he could never claim to be a political outsider again.

Trapped in a new consensus

That was precisely his problem when he reapproached the political scene in the 330s B.C., after Philip's victory. The supervision of Philip's victorious Macedon effectively enforced a real political consensus – this time no rhetorical construct of Demosthenes' own making. Few Athenians thought that there could or should be any further resistance to Macedon after the humiliating defeat at Chaeronea. Under these conditions – where there was much less scope for divergent views, especially in Demosthenes' old territory of foreign policy – it would have been much harder for politicians to outline their personal appeal. Demosthenes' star had fallen, and Athens' civic recovery was now being led by an old friend and rival, Lycurgus, a talented and trusted administrator and, like Demosthenes, a great orator.

Lycurgus' cultural ambitions for Athens in this period – the new cultural consensus, as far as we can tell – relied on a new concentration on the possibilities of the Athenian past for defining what Athens was about in the present day. The fifth-century 'golden age' of Athens had already come to be regarded as an epoch to look back at and emulate by the Athenians themselves, just as later ages and different peoples from the Romans onwards would come to do. State texts of the great tragic poets of the fifth century were produced; numerous civic landmarks were refurbished and others, like the one pictured here, built; there was an increased attention to the city's ancient cults.

Lycurgus' one surviving speech, and several fragmentary ones, show an attentiveness to the persuasive potential of Athenian history that goes well beyond even what is normal in Demosthenes. Earlier in his career, Demosthenes had used his compelling versions of the past to help communicate how promising and convincing he was as a budding statesman; now, drawing on the city's history was being used more than ever as an instrument of cultural unification, and was not so available for Demosthenes to draw on to fashion distinctive personal strategies. Instead of being an outsider stirring up patriotic feeling in a distinctive way, he was now part of the consensus.

It is probably no accident, then, that

when we do hear from him in the 330s – in his great defence speech *On the Crown*, from 330 – he had to go further than ever before in the emphasis he was prepared to put on versions of the Athenian past. He strenuously put himself in the same near-heroic bracket as great leaders like Themistocles as he defended his political record despite the unavoidable fact that it had led to disaster for Athens. The strategy worked – Ctesiphon, the defendant in *On the Crown*, was acquitted – but the fact that he had to go to such lengths to remind people of who he was (and of what he was known for) is important. In a Macedonian-dominated Athens, it must have been hard to see a future where the kind of vigorous personal politics of twenty years earlier could return. Demosthenes had been the future once, but with his previous policy no longer viable, all he could do was react to the workaday demands of a present where he was just as unable to pursue exciting policies as anyone else.

It required new crises – a major embezzlement scandal in 324 B.C., shortly followed by the revolt of Athens on the death of Philip's son and heir Alexander the Great – to put Demosthenes back in the forefront of his city's affairs one last time. His final burst of glory was short-lived, though, and ended in flight from the city and suicide – in the end, Macedon's rise led inevitably to the fall of her greatest Athenian opponent.

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